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ABSTRACT

A study of investigated perceptions of gay/lesbian undergraduates regarding their sense of marginalization or alienation in the college classroom. Two research questions were posed: (1) What, according to gay/lesbian students, are the characteristics of classroom environments that create feelings of marginalization? and (2) What, according to gay/lesbian students, are specific strategies employed to cope with these feelings? The participants were interviewed alone and in six focus groups of five or six students from southern California universities. Their responses, often taking the form of a narrative, were charted and categorized along two continuums representing a range of responses to the two research questions. The first continuum, the "marginalizing-centralizing continuum" ranges from narratives documenting "explicit marginalization" or homophobia on the part of instructors and students in a class and "implicit marginalization"--avoiding issues of homosexuality when they arose in the classroom, to narratives documenting "implicit centralization" and "explicit centralization" involving unplanned and planned inclusion of gay/lesbian views. The second continuum ranges from narratives documenting "response outing," that is, responses to marginalization that involve a direct confrontation or announcement of sexual orientation in the classroom to narratives documenting "response remaining closeted," "preoccupation/no active response" and "dropping out." The wealth of narratives documenting explicit marginalization and the suffering such practices induce in gay/lesbian students demands that sensitivity be implemented into the college curriculum. Too often, gay/lesbian students have been silenced in research; exploring homosexual issues with more qualitative methods can access important details that cannot possibly come through quantitative methods.
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**UNLOCKING THE CLASSROOM CLOSET:
PRIVILEGING THE MARGINALIZED VOICES
OF GAY/LESBIAN COLLEGE STUDENTS**

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Running head: THE CLASSROOM CLOSET

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**Unlocking the Classroom Closet:
Privileging the Marginalized Voices of Gay/Lesbian College Students**

"The Gay '90s" is a paradoxical term that has recently been applied to describe this decade. We have heard and seen much attention focused on gay/lesbian issues surrounding what most would consider ordinary American dreams: Dreams to be in the boy scouts, to serve in the military, and to raise children in the privacy of their own homes.¹ Instead, the result has been a nightmare that condemns gays/lesbians as "bad role models" (Howard, 1993, p. 8), unfit for serving our country or becoming parents. Certainly, "The Gay '90s" has brought these issues into the consciousness of our culture, yet it is obvious that many individuals still maintain that homosexuals and/or homosexuality are immoral (Glenn & Weaver, 1979; Kurdek, 1988; Larsen, Reed, & Hoffman, 1980).

America's dominant, publicized opinion of homosexuality is harming yet another percentage of our population, namely the gay/lesbian student.² It makes sense that the view of homosexuality as immoral will affect the quality of learning for the gay/lesbian student as societal disapproval filters into the classroom. These negative perceptions directly influence the gay/lesbian student in the university classroom because, "as in the larger national context, the attitudes serve to limit the experience of individuals whose interests and realities do not conform to prescribed cultural tenets" (LaSalle, 1992, p. 1). Furthermore, Sears (1987) suggests that educators marginalize instead of centralize the

¹ We did not differentiate between gay men and lesbian women for the purpose of this study. Our sample represented participants from both populations, and for that reason, the cumulative term "gay/lesbian" was adopted throughout this piece.

² A proposal for this study was previously presented in Miami, Florida at the 1993 Speech Communication Association convention entitled *"The Invisible Student at Risk: Addressing the Needs of the Gay/Lesbian Student."*

gay/lesbian student when they fail to address issues surrounding different sexual orientation. He goes on to say that:

Educators have a social responsibility to promote human dignity and to further social justice for gays and lesbians. In simplest terms this means providing a learning environment that is free from physical or psychological abuse, that portrays honestly the richness and diversity of humanity, that fosters an understanding of human sexuality, that integrates homosexual themes and issues into the curriculum, and that counsels young people who have or may have a different sexual orientation. (p. 81)

Accordingly, it can be argued that negative attitudes toward gay/lesbian students are serving to undermine the basic tenants upon which our educational system is founded. Without the basic dedication to equal rights for all students, many of our youth will continue to be forced to live within the margins of the classroom.

The purpose of this research is to discover perceptions of gay/lesbian college students regarding their sense of marginalization or alienation in the classroom. First, a review of relevant literature is explicated. Second, the methodology employed is discussed. Third, the results are revealed, which indicate the process of classroom marginalization and the subsequent student coping strategies. Finally, a discussion of limitations and future directions for research is provided.

Examining the History of the Closet: Exploring the Literature

Perhaps the reason gays/lesbians compare their struggles to the struggles of African-Americans and women is simply because they, too, have been alienated from mainstream society. This alienation is reflected in societal attitudes which send messages to the gay/lesbian population about both their status and their perceived worth. To research the implications surrounding alienating experiences of the gay/lesbian student, we will first illustrate the historical treatment of homosexuals to provide a framework for understanding

their alienation in society. It is next important to understand how crucial the classroom context is when examining "students at risk," and why gay/lesbians should be considered an "at risk" population. More specifically, the review of literature will close with the sense of marginalization that pervades the gay/lesbian's classroom experience.

The Gay/Lesbian Culture: A History of Oppression

Before reviewing recent studies examining the basis of negative attitudes toward gays/lesbians, it is important to first understand what oppression means. Pellegrini (1992) states that:

Oppression is a process; it is constituted within and through a complicated and dynamic network of asymmetrical power relations. Oppression is all about power . . . the power to maim, physically, mentally, and emotionally; and, importantly, the power to set the very terms of power. (pp. 53-54)

By understanding the process of oppression, it is easier to understand the implicit power and explicit nature of homophobia and how homophobia is related to heterosexism. The term "homophobia" was coined by Weinberg (1973) and is used to describe hostile reactions to gays/lesbians that suggest a "unidimensional construct of attitudes as expressions of irrational fears" (Herek, 1984a, p. 1).

Examining the implications of homophobic beliefs on the practices of institutions is equally important. Altman (1982) defines heterosexism as "that ideological structure that assumes heterosexuality as the norm and homosexuality as deviant and, indeed, despicable" (pp. 110-111). Blumenfield (1992) contends that heterosexism is "the system by which heterosexuality is assumed to be the only acceptable and viable life option" (p. 15). Heterosexism is a term that allows for a broader understanding of what happens to gays/lesbians in a heterosexually dominated society. As racism is a product of viewing the world from a dominant race's perspective, so heterosexism is the product of viewing the

world from the limited perspective of the dominant sexual orientation in society (Baker, 1991). This terminology ties negative attitudes to sexism, racism, and other forms of prejudice and highlights the social context in which the attitudes develop and are maintained (Herek, 1984a).

Therefore, the term heterosexism has been utilized in an effort to focus attention on the undercurrents of prejudice leading to discriminatory practices against gays/lesbians. Policies of heterosexism have been founded on feelings of homophobia, so that "heterosexism is the systemic display of homophobia in the institutions of society" (Pharr, 1988, p. 6). However, perhaps the most frightening part of heterosexism is that "like sexism, it is supported by institutions--local, state, and federal law" (Wolfe, 1988, p. 200). Consequently, as an extension of these institutions, the public education system serves to foster homophobia. Yet, unlike sexism or racism, the objects of heterosexist discrimination cannot be identified by sex or race because they are invisible.

When a group is forced to remain invisible, they are implicitly being told that they are abnormal or deviant. Unfortunately, the extent of this hatred extends far beyond these implicit messages. The National Gay and Lesbian Task Force (1986) reported that over 90 percent of the individuals they surveyed had experienced some form of harassment as a result of their sexual orientation. Furthermore, scholars have linked the violence and hostility experienced by gays/lesbians to the rate of suicide in this population. The Department of Health and Human Services estimate that out of the 5,000 suicides committed annually by young men and women between the ages of 15 and 24, over 30 percent of them are directly related to emotional turmoil over sexual identity issues and societal prejudices surrounding gay/lesbian relationships (Harbeck, 1992). Since only

approximately ten percent of the United States population is thought to be homosexual, this grim statistic illustrates that gay/lesbian youths are three times more likely to take their own life than other young people because of "the shame of ridicule and fear of attack" (Harbeck, p. 112) that they experience daily.

Homophobic attitudes leading to feelings of marginalization are to be expected considering the report commissioned by the United States Department of Justice on bias crimes (Finn & McNeil, 1987). This report concludes that gays/lesbians were the most-often victimized groups in the nation. Similarly, at Pennsylvania State University, a report on tolerance finds that "bias-motivated incidents most frequently targeted gay people" (D'Emilio, 1990, p. 18). According to Balzar (1993), the problem is clear: "Homosexuals are one of the few groups, if not the very last one, in our group-conscious society whose legitimacy can be questioned" (p. 1). This questioning of legitimacy has greatly jeopardized both the safety and freedoms that other Americans get to take for granted. Indeed, gays/lesbians "are the minority that everyone sees, but no one recognizes. . . . They are the last significant minority to be denied civil rights" (Smart & Sutehall, 1985, p. 4). Gays/lesbians are often painfully reminded that they lack the support and acceptance in American society. More specifically, this minority group is frequently the target of such insensitivity exemplified in the college classroom.

The Classroom Climate: A Framework for Understanding

When looking at education, it is easy to see why the goals of academic institutions have been so wrought with tension. As explained by Harbeck (1992), "schools have become a major arena of social conflict, as one group asserts traditional values, and the other demands that children be prepared for changes" (p. 1). Homosexuality epitomizes this

conflict in that it has been "a major threat to the traditional cultural ideology set forth in the schools" (p. 1). Rosenfeld and Jarrard (1985) define the classroom climate as the "social/psychological context within which the teacher and student interact and form their relationship" (p. 205). Mackenzie (1983) contends this climate is highly predictive of effective schooling. Anderson (1982) further supports Mackenzie's proposition by reviewing over 200 articles and concluding that climate is of central importance when discussing explanations and predictions of educational outcomes in terms of success or failure. For this reason it is critical to examine classroom climates and the implications this phenomenon has for the gay/lesbian student.

The effects of classroom climate on the student are quite varied, yet important when trying to understand the student's classroom experience. For example, climate has been found to influence student cognitive and affective behavior as well as personal growth (Fraser & Fisher, 1982; Martin-Reynolds & Reynolds, 1983). This indicates the extreme power that educators have on both the academic and social development of their students. Furthermore, studies suggest that supportive climates are correlated with interactions that are frequent, friendly, cooperative, helpful, trusting, and focused (Adler, Rosenfeld, & Towne, 1983; Gibb, 1960; Hays, 1970; Martin-Reynolds & Reynolds). These authors illustrate the relationship between student-teacher interactions and the overall educational climate created through their interactions. They additionally suggest, by proposing this relationship, a more clearly defined climate goal. In other words, now that we know how important a positive, supportive climate is for student development, we can and must aim toward incorporating those related interactions to further supportive academic experiences for the gay/lesbian student.

Unfortunately, the messages communicated from teacher to student do not always convey such sympathy or understanding. For example, in some classroom environments a teacher might inadvertently communicate to a student restricting preconceptions about appropriate or expected behaviors, attitudes, or personal goals based not on individual characteristics, but on stereotypical sex roles (Hall, 1982). To further illustrate this phenomenon a parallel can be drawn between the sexist educator and the heterosexual educator. The sexist educator often makes "evaluations and assumptions about abilities, personality characteristics, and role behaviors of men and women that reflects stereotypes based on sex-role attributes" (Rosenfeld & Jarrard, 1985, p. 205). As Rosenfeld and Jarrard continue to explain, "these evaluations are manifested in the perceived sexist individual's differential behavior toward females and males" (p. 205). Similarly, it can be expected that educators send equivalent messages but with heterosexual undertones that are perceived by the gay/lesbian student. These negatively perceived messages are not conducive to the open, supportive environment that research indicates as crucial to a student's effective schooling. Therefore, it seems probable that the gay/lesbian student's academic behavior and personal growth is significantly affected by the messages sent by the educator. This is important because of the power the educator has in creating classroom climate, and the effect such a climate has in predicting educational outcomes. Therefore, if the classroom climate is not positive, it could place the gay/lesbian student at risk.

Why Gays/Lesbians are "Students at Risk"

What seems clear so far is that students are at risk when their circumstances place them at a disadvantage in the classroom. We often think of the African-American student struggling with Anglo norms in standardized testing arenas. This subtle bias places the

minority student in a risky situation as a generalizable characteristic (namely, their own sense of culture) is hindering their academic pursuits. In the case of gay/lesbian students, the generalizable characteristic is their sexual orientation. Yet, according to Friend (1993), "serious discussions of how inequalities in terms of sexual orientation are reproduced and sanctioned by schooling has been absent in the social analyses of diversity, equity, and power in education" (p. 210).

This leads us to Grayson (1992) who asks the question: "Why deal with homosexuality in education as an equality issue?" (p. 171). Lorde (1983) provides one sensible answer to the first half of this question by asserting that "if we truly intend to eliminate oppression, heterosexism and homophobia must be addressed" (p. 9). In Lorde's opinion, as long as any one portion of the population is oppressed or considered fair game for name calling, stereotyping, violence, and other forms of perpetuation of bias and discrimination, we are all oppressed.

The second half of Grayson's (1992) question can only be answered by looking at the educational setting as a necessary context to examine the experiences and perceptions of gays/lesbians. D'Augelli (1991) states broadly that, "the late adolescent and early adulthood years of college and university life are culturally conceived of as a time for identity exploration" (p. 140). Yet, for the gay/lesbian student these expectations are rendered much more complex because of the additional identity components they must manage (Herdt, 1989). The educational setting seems the perfect place to examine the gay/lesbian college classroom experience because "the campus is a popular place for coming out" (Lehman, 1978, p. 57). This is perhaps because "many individuals first begin to question and explore their sexuality during their college years" (University of California, Los

Angeles, 1990, p. 1). The questioning and development of their identity, combined with the lack of support in education, creates an academic space of isolation and loneliness.

The Classroom Experience: Being Alone

Recently much attention has been devoted to the marginalized student (e.g., Baker, 1991; Ralston, Ambler, & Scudder, 1991) and the communication needed to address these students at risk (e.g., Chesebro, Cragan, & McCullough, 1981; McCroskey, Booth-Butterfield, & Payne, 1989). Yet, with an understanding of the socially sanctioned, explicit discrimination of homosexuals, it is not surprising that many gays/lesbians choose to remain invisible (D'Emilio, 1990) rather than face the harsh consequences of the "previously (and in many cases, currently) unrestricted power of educational administrators and the extremes of community intolerance" (Slagle, 1994, p.1). Addressing the needs of the metaphorically "invisible" gay/lesbian students becomes difficult because their identity is often hidden (D'Emilio) and identification is rarely desired by the individual. Unfortunately, it is these anonymous students, many of whom are frightened and confused, "who may be most in need of support and guidance" (University of California, Los Angeles, 1990, p. 1).

The gay/lesbian student is excluded from the educator's consciousness and therefore excluded from an equal chance for education. D'Augelli (1992) explains such exclusion, pointing out that:

When [gays/lesbians] pursue an understanding of themselves, they do not encounter a literature affirming their lives. More importantly, when they look to their undergraduate curricula for insight, they find themselves deleted from most courses. They are the "invisible" minority, yet the "hidden curriculum" that devalues the existence and contribution of lesbians and gay men is quite clear. (p. 214)

Unfortunately, the very arena that is meant to help students grow actually hinders their

intrapersonal development. Put another way, Friend (1993) argues that "while schools can be described as potentially a site of extraordinary democracy, the process and outcomes of schools deeply reproduce and promote the very social inequities they are said to equalize" (p. 210). It is therefore quite easy to understand how gay/lesbian students have their experiences invalidated by the very institutions that are supposed to enrich their lives and deepen their understanding of the world in which they live.

The gay/lesbian students learn from academic curriculum, fellow students, and teachers to be ashamed of their sexual identity. D'Augelli (1992) notes that "at a time when accurate information and supportive experience are critical to their development, young lesbians and gay men find few, if any, affirming experiences in higher educational settings" (p. 214). While other students are learning self-esteem and self-worth, the gay/lesbian student is often left with feelings of self-doubt and self-hatred. Friend (1993) notes that "within many aspects of schools' curricula, for example, the value of the superiority of heterosexuality over homosexuality is displayed" (p. 211). In addition to the curriculum, the individuals instructing the gay/lesbian student are contributing to this problem. Sears (1989) concludes that most of the teachers in training he sampled "expressed negative attitudes about homosexuality and harbored homophobic feelings toward lesbians and gay men" (p. 3). From this, it is not difficult to understand why the gay/lesbian student finds great difficulty obtaining feelings of comfort and compassion in the classroom.

It is not surprising that the gay/lesbian student might feel marginalized in the classroom given that "homophobia is accepted and encouraged by society, particularly in the sterile world of academia which allows, promotes and creates homophobia" (Bapst, 1991, p.

1). D'Augelli (1989b) found that "evidence gathered at several universities reveals widespread negative attitudes toward lesbians and gay men at every setting studied" (p. 546; see also Herek, 1989; Sears, 1989). This stifles the gay/lesbian's collegiate experience as even those students who are "out" and comfortable in other areas of their lives remain suppressed in the classroom that negates the importance of Lesbian/Gay identity (Bapst). This negation exists because "being openly gay on campus still goes against the grain" (D'Emilio, 1990, p. 17). As socially sanctioned homophobic attitudes trickle down into the classroom, many gay/lesbian students are left feeling different and excluded.

Because our educational institutions do not value the gay/lesbian student, that they are often left without support of any kind. Friends of Project 10 Incorporated (1989) explain that:

Above all else, growing up gay or lesbian is living daily with a terrible secret that no one must ever know. . . . Gay adolescents must be ever on guard so that should a conversation turn suddenly to homosexuality or a friend or parent launch into a "queer joke," they are not given away by a quivering in their voice or fear in their eyes. (p. 5)

Maintaining this facade of heterosexuality on campus requires considerable energy. LaSalle (1992) argues that "the expression of negative feelings toward lesbian, gay and bisexual people causes [them] psychological and social stress" (p. 1). For this reason it should not be startling that the gay/lesbian student is dramatically affected by the stresses placed on her or him by the demands of the "straight" academic structure. Several universities (see Nieberding, 1989; University of California, Los Angeles, 1990; University of California, Santa Cruz, 1990; University of Massachusetts, Amherst, 1985) reported investigations of their own campus climates and revealed that gays/lesbians were "significantly more likely than their heterosexual counterparts to have experienced problems associated with harassment, discrimination and loneliness" (LaSalle, 1992, p. 6). The University of Oregon

(1990) further reports that "the University environment is neither consistently safe for, nor tolerant of, nor academically inclusive of lesbians, gay men, or bisexuals" (p. 5).

We must ask ourselves: How? Aside from the explicit messages of hatred, how does the gay/lesbian student come to feel uncomfortable, alienated, or marginalized in the classroom? These are the questions that provide the framework for our examination of the gay/lesbian student's experiences in the college classroom.

Existing Methodological Limitations

Due to the nascent nature of gay/lesbian research, most of the literature available on gay/lesbian students are not studies, but commentaries often generating suggestions for the incorporation of the marginalized student into the classroom (see Baker, 1991; Bapst, 1991; D'Emilio, 1990; Geller, 1991; Hart, 1989; Marso, 1991; National Association, 1992; Nieberding, 1989; Nuehring, Fein, & Tyler, 1974; Rofes, 1989; Scott, 1988; Sears, 1987; Smart & Sutehall, 1985). Although important, these commentaries do not include original research to support their claims of what might be important for the gay/lesbian student.

Of the studies actually making claims about the gay/lesbian student, most have employed empirical measures. For example, studies have sampled college undergraduates using a variety of variables such as gender, race, family background, age, length of time in college, and place of residence to predict attitudes toward gays/lesbians (D'Augelli & Rose, 1990; Reynolds, 1985; Sears, 1989). Other research methods include placing undergraduate students into controlled settings to test the effects of different videotapes on attitude change toward homosexuals (Goldberg, 1982). These studies offer only the heterosexual student's perceptions of gays/lesbians, not the perceptions of the gay/lesbian students. The major fault of these studies is their complete exclusion of the gay/lesbian voice.

In addition to the empirical, rhetorical (see Slagle, 1994) and qualitative perspectives (see Friend, 1993; LaSalle, 1992) have been utilized minimally. Slagle utilizes feminist pedagogical theories to examine homophobia and heterosexism in the classroom, yet the gay/lesbian student is discussed theoretically, not explicitly. LaSalle, while not specifically examining the gay/lesbian student, does question faculty, staff, and students on a college campus about gay/lesbian issues. LaSalle, using inductive analysis, classified the written comments from 862 surveys into: advocating, accepting, neutral, oppositional, and hostile. She justified her use of inductive analysis in stating that "the analysis of textual data, in this case written responses to an open-ended question, facilitates our understanding of the values and beliefs of the individuals" (p. 6). While adopting a qualitative approach to data analysis, LaSalle (like those before her) does not examine intolerance and marginalization from the perspective of the gay/lesbian student.

Friend (1993) examines the nature and impact of heterosexism in public high schooling through the use of narratives. He attempts, through this carefully selected methodology, to "de-silence the experiences of members who survive within the homophobic and heterosexist cultures of schooling" (p. 210). Friend maintains that "by the very 'perversity' of homophobic silencing, these voices could not reflect a random sampling. They have been selected, instead, because of their poignancy and capacity to illustrate critical points of the analysis" (p. 210).

We contend that gay/lesbian college students also have been further marginalized through the research methods employed to investigate their alienation. Instead of having their experiences privileged, the marginalized student has become further peripheralized by having their voices excluded from data analysis. To amend this laxity, we have adopted a

research agenda that centers on the stories of gay/lesbian students in the hopes of further understanding the alienation and detachment they experience. Based on the existing research, we propose the following research questions:

- RQ1: What, according to gay/lesbian college students, are the characteristics of classroom environments that create feelings of marginalization?**
- RQ2: What, according to gay/lesbian college students, are specific strategies employed to cope with these feelings?**

Admittedly, gathering data on this subject matter is not an easy task. This may be one reason most studies take on a survey experimental approach. In this way, researchers have effectively distanced themselves from the people being studied by allowing the participants to respond to questionnaires individually. Although this suggests a commitment to privacy, it remains an impersonal means for researching students that are commonly out of reach. It is understandable that individuals might feel uncomfortable and vulnerable discussing aspects of personal hatred, especially when that hatred is focused toward the individual recounting the story. However, this seems to be such an important key to unlocking the classroom closet, that it can no longer be viewed as an insurmountable obstacle. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985) it is crucial to grasp realities in an individuals' own terms, capturing the phenomenon in the participant's time frame. Brodkey (1987) notes that "experience is not (indeed, cannot be) reproduced in speech or writing, and must instead be narrated" (p. 26). This illustrates the importance of working with such a sensitive issue, yet maintaining concentration on the participant's story.

Methodology

As qualitative methods are used to discover the experiences of individuals in the "natural language at large" (Schwartz & Jacobs, 1974, p. 4), this would seemingly provide

the appropriate forum for data collection and analysis. Participants were contacted through advertisements in local and campus newspapers, and announcements were made at weekly Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual Student Union meetings. We further networked through the interested students, asking them if they knew anyone else who would like to participate in our future focus groups. All participants signed consent forms before taking part in this study, agreeing to be audio recorded, and to keep all discussions confidential. All audio recordings were later transcribed for use as data.

Following Taylor and Bogdan's (1984) suggestion to locate and get into the setting of interest, the pre-field work for this research project initially began with a several group interviews consisting of between three and five participants each. The groups were non-exclusive, meaning people floated in and out of the discussion, but only one person told their story at a time. The advantage to this format was that people heard other stories and had time to formulate their own based on others' experiences.

In the groups we simply asked the participants to recount a situation in the classroom where they felt uncomfortable and a situation where they felt comfortable. All but one participant addressed a gay/lesbian related experience. In one group when we asked, "Can you think of an experience where you felt uncomfortable in a class?" Joe, an information systems senior, went so far as to ask in response, "Because I'm queer?" Most respondents assumed, we suppose because they all knew our research areas, that we were asking for gay/lesbian-related experiences.

The data gathered overall was very useful in that it strongly suggested the necessity of utilizing a more interactive group format to gather data. In one-on-one interviews, participants had difficulty thinking of situations to discuss. However, in a group setting,

they bounced situations off of each other which created a safe environment to exchange rich stories. Allowing researcher flexibility to filter into our agenda, we adopted a more interactive format for the future groups.

We gathered small groups of five-six gay/lesbian college students from surrounding Southern Californian universities. We kept the groups small enough to promote honesty through intimacy and safety, yet large enough so that individuals did not feel spotlighted. Six of these intense focus groups were facilitated; each session was approximately one hour in length. They were conducted in one of the researcher's homes to ensure a comfortable, relaxing environment and to encourage safe, interactive discussions. Focus group interactions centered around three main topic areas: 1) Experiences--personal stories of alienation or marginalization in the classroom, 2) Perceptions--overriding themes of marginalization or more general, theoretical speculations, and 3) Suggestions--to ensure that all students will experience a supportive, open, positive classroom climate. Following a brief welcoming to the group and introductions, we asked the participants to take a moment to think of an experience in the classroom that in some way relates to their being gay/lesbian. Following this discussion, we asked for their perceptions or explanations of these experiences. Example questions included: "Why do you feel safe in some classes and not in others? How do you know which classes to 'come out' in? How do your 'coming out' experiences relate to your academic experiences?" The discussion concluded with questions directed toward improvements or solutions to the problems generated above.

The Purpose of Focus Groups

Focus groups, as explained by Morgan (1988), are a form of qualitative research utilizing group interviews to gather data. The main difference between this format and

other interviewing techniques is that reliance is not on "alternation between the researcher's questions and the research participants' responses . . . [but rather] on interaction within the group, based on topics supplied by the researcher, who typically takes the role of a moderator" (Morgan, pp. 9-10). By using this format, participants felt more comfortable sharing their stories as they were surrounded by others with similar experiences. This was articulated by several group members represented by Dave's comment that "some of this isn't easy to talk about, I'm glad that you [the other group members] have gone through this. It's not such a secret anymore." Also, individuals are more likely to think of precise situations as their memory was prompted by another's narration. Andy explained that "it really helps when trying to think of your own stuff when other people who have gone through it are saying the same stuff. You know, it helps you remember more."

The role of moderator was fueled by their recollections as we encouraged the spirit of discourse. The group was allowed to run without interruption and only interjected with a question when the discussion dwindled. With this method, the participants were able to take away from the discussion a constructive means for exchanging ideas in the future. Interestingly, following our first focus group we ran into a few of the participant later that night. One of the participants walked up to us "just to say thanks" for conducting the group. He said he had learned a lot, and felt better all day because of it. He even suggested that people should get together once a month for a pot-luck dinner to share stories, and discuss gay/lesbian events. Therefore, this method for data collection extends beyond gathering information from the gay/lesbian community. It provides gay/lesbians students a valuable tool for continuing this dialogue and it illustrates to each of them that they are not alone.

Narratives as Data

The use of narratives for analysis as explained by Riessman (1993), concentrates on personal stories as the object of investigation. For this reason, it seems plausible that individual stories can be gathered and analyzed to construct commentary about the classroom situation at large. As explained by Rosenwald and Ochberg (1992), this is because:

How individuals recount their histories--what they emphasize and omit, their stance as protagonist or victim, the relationship the story establishes between teller and audience--all shape what individuals can claim of their own lives. Personal stories are not merely a way of telling someone (or oneself) about one's life, they are the means by which identities may be fashioned. (p. 1)

In other words, when individuals retell past events, they claim identities and construct lives through the stories they tell (Riessman, 1993). More specifically, when the researcher advantages personal narrations, the cultural resources from which these stories are based (i.e., the classroom setting) can be examined.

Once narratives were gathered and transcribed, the true challenge began: finding categories that can be built into useable arguments. This evolved by "combining insight and intuition with an intimate familiarity with the data" (Taylor & Bogdan, 1984, p. 130). The next step was to "identify similarities across the moments into an aggregate, a summation" (Riessman, 1993, p. 13). Being a "dynamic and creative process" (Taylor & Bogdan, 1984, p. 130), data analysis emphasized the importance of gaining a deeper understanding of the data, meanwhile allowing our interpretations to evolve along with the development of our comprehension.

The narratives were broken down and categorized by comparing one example to another to identify their common properties (i.e. all narratives comparing gay/lesbian

experiences to other discrimination were grouped together). We first grouped stories with topic similarities, then asked what the similarities represent thematically (i.e. gays/lesbians feel similar alienation to the alienation felt by other marginalized groups: African-Americans, women, etc.). These categories were identified to illustrate how the process of marginalization was enacted (i. e., exclusion of gay/lesbian topics, avoidance of gay/lesbian issues, overt heterosexist comments, etc.), and how participants communicatively cope with these feelings in the classroom (i. e. tuning-out, preoccupation, direct response).

Moving to a more refined phase, we made connections between categories which involved the context of the situation, action/interactional strategies used by the participants in the dialogue, and the consequences of such discourse (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Categories subsequently emerged that explained both the process of marginalization and the use of strategies to cope with that marginalization over time. While certain value can be gleaned from analyzing data and grouping segments into thematic categories, this research project moves beyond simple themes-of-explanation and reveals the temporality of the communication process students at risk perceive, participate in, and use to describe their marginalized situation. Understanding that "communication is ultimately about creating shared Time" (Conquergood, 1991, p. 183) the goal of this research is to create a space involving the participants, the researcher, and the readers.

The Privilging of Their Voices

The extreme uniqueness of this inquiry is hearing the stories told by gay/lesbian students. The significance of this is illustrated by Brodkey (1987) who notes that writing ethnographically "attempts to bring stories not yet heard to the attention of the academy"

(p. 48). With this comes responsibility as the naturalistic writer is "frequently engaged in something closely akin to narrative writing, pregnant with theme and argument" (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983, p. 211). The most appropriate way to present our findings in a manner that recognizes the participants, the researcher, and the reader is to intertwine narratives with explanation. We first divided all narrations into individual subject areas. Each individual topic was separated within individual narrations, yet coded so complete stories could later be re-assembled. Then the individual pieces were loosely grouped according to their location in the communication process (the story involved either the message sent, or the response to a message sent). Messages sent developed into a "Marginalizing-- Centralizing" continuum of classroom commentary, and student responses developed into a "Self-Assured--Self-Conscious" continuum of coping strategies. These were very large, inclusive categories containing many different types of examples which were then broken down into more selective categories.

Results

To better understand the sense of place the gay/lesbian student experience in the classroom, two continuua were formed. Communication was found along the "Marginalizing--Centralizing" continuum to be based on the degree of favorability shown. As well, these marginalizing-centralizing messages were found to vary in the degree of explicitness. Explicit comments reflected direct, intentional remarks by the professor that were perceived by the student as marginalizing. Implicit messages were more indirect and unintentional. Examples of explicit, "unfavorable" messages were: homophobic comments, unfavorable attitudes about homosexuality, and the exclusion of gay/lesbian topics when appropriate. Examples of more implicit, unfavorable messages tended to be professors

avoiding gay/lesbian topics, or ignoring the gay/lesbian perspective altogether. Explicit, favorable messages were exemplified in: stressing the importance of gay/lesbian perspectives, unprompted inclusion of gay/lesbian issues in discussions, showing special interest in a gay/lesbian student, and responding well when gay/lesbian issues come up. Examples of implicit, favorable messages tended to be more subtle, usually characterized by the professor responding favorably to gay/lesbian comments or students when the issue comes out.

Upon receiving these varied messages in the classroom, the gay/lesbian students exhibited a variety of strategies to cope with the situation, ranging from Self-Assured to Self-Conscious responses. Typically, the self-assured students responded by: tuning classroom activities out and carrying on with the rest of the lecture, responding by writing a letter, or saying something in class. The gay/lesbian who was more self-assured chose to come out to educate the class or correct misleading information. However, those gays/lesbians who were more self-conscious tended to find another way to respond while staying closeted. These students who did not respond remained preoccupied with the message in class, or dropped out of school all together. The following sections detail the differences in both the messages and responses concerning the gay/lesbian's inclusion (or exclusion) in the classroom.

The Marginalizing-Centralizing Continuum

The gay/lesbian students who participated in our study shared a diversity of stories about their classroom experiences. We made the first division according to the purpose of the students' narration; the story was either told to illustrate a positive experience or a negative experience. Students sharing incidents that left them feeling marginalized tended

to suggest that a professor either explicitly sent marginalizing messages, or implicitly sent marginalizing messages, perhaps even unintentionally.

Explicit Marginalization. Stories of explicit marginalization were generally overt. While there is a range within the category, all the narrations reflected a negative experience by the student, and an active role taken by the professor. They are represented by stories like Joe's, who stated:

I was in a classical civilizations class and we were talking about Socrates and Aristotle and the rest of the Greeks. So my teacher comes out and he says somewhat sarcastically, "well, how does it make you feel that Socrates was a fairy?"

This is a very obvious example of an unnecessary comment made by the professor probably to ingratiate himself upon the students. Although perhaps used for humor, the result was to dramatically affect a student, and that student's perception of the classroom environment. The following examples illustrate that some comments did not occur for humor's sake, but stemmed from the professor's homophobic belief:

I'm in this psychology class this semester, and our teacher told us that he believes that homosexuality is a curable, psychological illness, even though it was taken off the books in 1974. He still thinks gays and lesbians are very sick and need treatment. (Justin)

I had a teacher like that. I was in this discussion class of about 12 people and our teacher said about the same thing, that homosexuality should still be a disorder and an example of abnormal psychology. I about died! (Bruce)

Like I have one professor and he says that feminism goes against biology. Now, if he believes that, I doubt very highly that I'm going to go up to him and have a nice friendly conversation about homosexuality with him! (Kenny)

These students were made to feel very uncomfortable in the classroom on the basis of their sexuality. Students left with extremely negative feelings about both the classroom climate and their own sexuality. In other instances, the comment were aimed directly toward the gay/lesbian student. This can make an even greater impact because the student cannot hide in the classroom. Two interesting examples were offered.

I took that basic speech class and the first speech had to be on another group of people or another culture. I've had friends talk about gays or lesbians as another group that we are unfamiliar with, so I picked lesbians. My teacher said that I couldn't talk about that because "there is only a fine line between informing and recruiting." I mean really, like I might decide to be black because I heard this great speech on it?! But she said that the topic was totally inappropriate for the class. I felt really outcasted. (Lisa)

I think I had that same teacher and you know, she was so religious, she was constantly talking about her relationship with Jesus Christ and stuff. I think if she ever found out I was gay she'd hate me, which is really stupid for me to be feeling in an interpersonal communication because we're supposed to talk about ourselves and I have to lie about everything. I totally made up a different personality for that class. (Tom)

These examples are very clear-cut. They illustrate direct communication that gay/lesbian students perceive as marginalizing. Yet with the preceding examples, they are so blatant that almost anyone would suggest their marginalizing nature. The following example is not quite as distinct, yet coded as an instance of explicit communication.

I'm a communicative disorders major and there was a small group of students learning the colors in sign language, and the color for green is [demonstrates the sign] like this with the letter "g." There's this guy who is also gay and he kept going like this [demonstrates], and this is the sign for gay, with the letter "g" closer to your chin and the teacher just got all hysterical and said, "Don't do that, it's bad, it's wrong." We kept asking her what it meant and she said it's, well she just associated it with a lot of shame and guilt and negative feelings and when we found out what it actually meant, I didn't feel I could be myself in that class. It was kind of a negative situation. (Carlos)

These examples illustrate the direct impact a teacher's actions can have on a student's classroom experience. They were all classified in the "Explicit Marginalization" category because they all involved messages sent by the professor and perceived by the student as marginalizing; yet, they also represented intentional actions by the professor. Other messages that were reported by the gay/lesbian students to illustrate negative experiences were not coded as intentional actions by the professor.

Implicit Marginalization. Messages indicating "Implicit Marginalization" were perceived by the student when the professor avoided issues of homosexuality when they arose in the classroom, or neglected to give examples from the gay/lesbian community when the material seemed appropriate for that type of information. The following

examples illustrate the student's frustration when they know mentioning an individual's homosexuality should be included in the lecture, yet it is not.

We were talking in this literature class about like Byron or Chelle and British poets and people knew that they were bisexual or homosexual, but nobody really delved into any of the real emotions that maybe a homosexual male feels. It was just kind of put aside, like, "oh yeah he's gay by the way," and that was about it, that was all that was mentioned of it. (Brian)

I took a class in woman's studies which was interesting because you know, a lot of the woman's studies departments are criticized for being the lesbian department and blah blah blah and when I took the class it was real interesting because not a thing was covered on lesbianism or anything. It was women in cross-cultural perspectives. There were a couple of times when it would have been appropriate to mention something, like when we were talking about love in different societies and it could have been brought in but the professor treated it like such a taboo thing to talk about, it made me feel weird, like guilt by association. (Kenny)

I've never understood one thing, why are teachers so afraid to talk about homosexuality in their classes. I mean, like when we talk about the ancient Greeks and don't mention anything. I mean it's like it was such an important part of their culture, and the way they viewed knowledge, yet no one ever mentions it. Like it's a secret. (Adam)

The previous examples suggest that students feels marginalized in the classroom when the professor is unwilling to include the significance or importance of the gay/lesbian culture. There exists a lack of awareness in the college classroom that gay men and lesbian women have contributed significantly to the history, the literature, and the diversity of the world. Such an absence reenforces the concept of homosexuality as unspoken, unheard, and invisible in the classroom.

Other stories indicate that students are aware when the gay/lesbian culture is neglected when discussing other cultures. While these examples are not as direct as Lisa's story listed above, they do suggest that the gay/lesbian student notices when discussions of other minority groups do not include their culture.

Well, in my minority group relations class we discussed all different types of minority groups and the marketing that applied to those groups and the instructor completely skipped gays and lesbians. It was so obviously overlooked. (Clarke)

In my marketing class we were discussing different marketing segments of the population, ya know, black, Chicano, women, men, married, etc. and the professor made no comments about gays and lesbians. So after the class I went to his office and asked why, with all the companies making such strong plugs to the gay community, like Absolut vodka, and Banana Republic, did

he skip gays and lesbians? He said they can't obtain any statistics on that population with the census, so we will never really know. Doesn't that suck? (Joe)

In addition to being neglected at a cultural level, gays/lesbians are also ignored at a relational level. The following also indicates their dissatisfaction when discussions of relationships do not include gays/lesbians.

Some teacher totally ignored the homosexual aspect of relationships and in the book that we have which is about two inches thick I counted five paragraphs on homosexual behavior and all the footnotes were from the 70's and I'm going to write a letter to the company about the book. But, it was just totally out of date, totally irrelevant information that they mentioned in the book and then they didn't even mention it in class. But they went on and on about straight people. (Karen)

My teacher was talking about relationships and that the only reason we date and court and stuff is to get married, that the only reason for relationships is to lead to marriage, and I'm thinking OK, where does that leave me? I'm never going to get married. I totally do not belong in that class, I just get depressed, nothing relates to me at all. (Bill)

Luckily, not all of the narrations reflect discontent in the classroom. Other stories illustrate the power that professor's comments and actions have to include gay/lesbian students or to centralize their perspective. Again, the division between marginalizing and centralizing was given by the student, but we further divided the centralizing category according to their perceptions of the communicative intent behind the professor's message. We asked ourselves, did this teacher intentionally go out of his or her way to centralize the gay/lesbian student, or did it happen more inexplicitly or unintentionally?

Explicit Centralization. The following examples represent the direct actions of the professor affecting the students' perceptions of their academic experiences. The first set of narrations reflect very obvious attempts to include the gay/lesbian population in the classroom, whereas the second set reflects more subtle attempts. The more distinct examples are represented by the following narrations.

I have a teacher in a theater history class and he's gay. Whenever we're on a subject in class, like Greek theater, he'll throw out certain titles and stuff that are gay themes or that have a gay oriented issues in it or something 'for further study for myself so he's really good about

extending the study outside the classroom pertaining to gay and lesbian issues. So I kind of like that. It's neat to have a professor that takes an interest in you in that regard. (Christian)

I had a teacher like that, maybe the same guy. We were talking about Achilles and his love for Pericles, and the teacher elaborated on it, not like graphically, he just gave enough then said if anyone was interested in this kind of stuff to go to the library and follow up with reading the Persian Boy or reading about Alexander the Great. I was always going over to the library and looking in the computer for these obscure titles, it was such an enhancement to my education. (Danny)

Other stories do not reflect such an apparent attempt by the professor to address the gay/lesbian population. However, the more subtle inclusion tactics did not go noticed or unappreciated. The narratives were categorized from their sense of affiliation with the lecture or a welcomed sense of place in the discussion. This was probably best illustrated in the following stories.

I was in this management class. Two-hundred and fifty people in the class and the instructor talked about management style in the work force and you don't know, you have to take into consideration who you are dealing with whether it's a cultural thing and he even brought up the fact that you might have to deal with people who are gay or lesbian in your office and that's something I've never heard in any of the business classes because they are usually so conservative. For him to do that made me feel so good that this guy had the courage to do that in front of 250 people. (Joe)

I have a philosophy class and the teacher is from Denmark and whenever we talk about institutionalized discrimination or various philosophical issues he'll always bring up gays and lesbians for examples of people who have had a lot of philosophical ideas and philosophical views twisted against them. She always brings that up trying to shop the other side, and it's a nice feeling of feeling included in the classroom and feeling a part of it. (Jonathan)

Both of these examples reveal direct support from the professors on the diversity of sexuality and its implications for the issues at hand. Perhaps because such comments are rare, these otherwise quick instances of acceptance created feelings of inclusion and appreciation. As the following section details, not all centralizing experiences are as overt.

Implicit Centralization. The following section represents the narratives reflecting feelings of inclusion. These stories were generally in response to an unplanned event in the classroom. Typically, an event which the professor responded to positively sent messages of centralization to the gay/lesbian student, like this experience shared by Karl:

In my honors cultural anthropology class, we study different cultural practices; different aspects of the family and courtship. We were talking about what led to dating and then going steady into courtship and marriage. I had nothing to contribute to the class. The experiences they were discussing had nothing to do with me. This is a very small discussion type of class and then the professor called on me and asked about my experiences because I'm from Sweden. He wanted to know if dating women was different here. I was totally put on the spot and I just said, "fuck it." I was so nervous, my hands were shaking and my heart was racing. I said, "I cannot contribute anything because I don't know anything about dating women, I only date men." The class said, "Oh my God!" But the professor was very cool about it and then he asked me to compare my homosexual experiences with heterosexual experiences. He was very cool about it and handled it well. After that, he was conscientious about including a gay or lesbian perspective. We discussed cultures where homosexuality was more acceptable. He was much more aware of the gay stuff. (Karl)

This student took a risk most would never have to contemplate in their college career. And fortunately, the classroom environment was supportive of his decision to be honest about not dating women. In the following section, we will explore more closely the coping strategies used by gays/lesbians in their efforts to feel included.

Coping Strategies

The following strategies were first divided according to the student's decision to either respond to the message, or not to actively respond to the message. This decision was based on the student's sense of self at that time in their life. The more self-assured, the more willing the student was willing to respond to the message. However, when the gay/lesbian student is at a more self-conscious point in their identity, uncomfortability inhibits their chances of responding. The more self-assured student did respond to a marginalizing message by either "coming out of the closet," or by responding while remaining "closeted."

Response-Outing. The following examples all reflect the student's decision to come out of the closet and admit their homosexuality to one degree or another.

I was listening to this black girl rant and rave about being black and having to look in mirror every day and say "I'm black and I'm discriminated against," and raggedy, rag, rag, rag. So I just said, "Well, you guys know what it's like to be discriminated against when you are born but you don't have to tell you parents you're black, they know! And they don't discriminate against you, they support you, mine don't. And you don't get fired from a job because after you worked there a couple years they find out that you are gay or lesbian and then you are discriminated against. You know, there are other kinds of discrimination other than from the

color of your skin." Basically, you know, I just came out to my whole class. And as I'm saying this stuff in class in the back of my head, I'm saying, why are you saying this to these 45 people? They don't need to know that I'm a lesbian. Why, why did I do that? Why did I feel like I had to do that? But it was just, you know, like enough, is enough or something. I don't know. (Donna)

I am taking a social work class and the last time I was taking a test, all the questions that had anything to do with relationships only referred to straight people. I talked to the professor after that last test and told her that I thought the exams should be more inclusive of different types of relationships. You know, like gay or lesbian relationships. You would think that would be a given in a social work class. I guess we'll see what the next exam looks like. (Laura)

Both of these students chose to come out in order to make their point. Both expressed feelings of comfortability with their homosexuality and a willingness to disclose personal information for the sake of being included. However, in not all circumstances are the students willing to put their own sexuality on the line to respond in a classroom. Other strategies involved the gay/lesbian's choice to remain in the closet.

Response-Remaining Closeted. Here students, for one reason or another, are unwilling to use their sexuality as a catalyst for change. However, they still adopt an active role by responding, they just do not address the class or the teacher in person.

I was in this class and the teacher was talking about Leonardo de Vinci and a couple of the other guys were making the gay jokes about something else. I'll never know what possessed me but I kind of said off-handedly "Wasn't de Vinci gay?" And my teacher said, "Probably." I just wasn't ready to come out to shut the guys up, but I thought if they knew that one of the great artists was gay that would be cool. (Adam)

I was in a class and the teacher made a very, very slanderous comment about lesbians. He was saying something about hormones and chromosomes and big men and women. But he said something about these statistics and studies when they injected ram and sheep with male hormones and he said the sheep started acting like lesbians. He said they peed like male rams. I couldn't believe he just slid that in. I wanted to stand up and scream. But, the next day I went and talked to his dean. I actually wasn't able to see the dean, but I did end up writing him a letter. I just wanted to say, you know, lesbians don't act like men. We don't stand up and pee. We don't scratch our crotches and act like straight men. (Ann)

I was in the upper division communication theories class in a large lecture hall and the teacher simply said something about sexual preference so I dropped him an anonymous note in his box indicating that he had stressed the importance and significance of language usage and the difference between connotative and denotative meanings. I let him know that many of us in the gay community find offense in the connotation that sexual preference brings to mind--that we actually prefer this lifestyle to another choice. I asked him to be more careful with his -29

language use in the future. He actually read my letter in class and thanked the author for correcting him. Actually, it was pretty cool. (Kelly)

Each of these students indicated the sense of anger and frustration felt when slanderous comments were made. Yet, none of them felt comfortable or self-assured enough to challenge the homophobia directly. The other side of the coping strategy continuum is represented by students that do not actively respond to the messages they perceive as marginalizing in the classroom.

Preoccupation/No Active Response. There were many examples of situations where the student for one reason or another does not respond to the marginalizing situation. This, of course, did not mean that the student was not affected by the messages, just that the class and professor never heard about it. These examples represent the wide variety of situations that leads a gay/lesbian student to remain silent in the face of a marginalizing circumstance.

Early in the semester my teacher indicated that she was homophobic. Ya know, just by the way she acted in class and I'm very open, but I never felt like I could be open in that class. I think it hurt me, not being able to respond as me, but having to cover up and even after being out for so long. I just couldn't muster the energy to take her on. (Carlos)

I was in class and the teacher made a comment that just blew me away. I was absolutely enraged. And I thought, I cannot believe this guy is actually doing this in front of these other people and of course some of the people in the back are snickering and I debated about whether to go and talk to him about it or not and I ended up speaking to some other people that knew him and they told me that he's just weird. That it wasn't meant to be negative, but that's the way I took it at first, but after I talked to a few people it kind of calmed me down. I think instructors need to be aware of how their comments because I sat in that class and all I could ever think about was that one comment. That they don't clarify them or know how they are taken by the class in general. (Joe)

I had an art history class and it was modern art and a lot of the class was showing slides of artists and everything from architecture to designers to water color to mixed media and artist in film. The professor picked out a particular number that were gay themes. It was a huge class and I remember the comments I heard from those students. It was just incredible. People were laughing and snickering and saying their little two bits. I was just looking around the room saying to myself, "people are so fucking open about this!" I was just ready to stand up and scream, but I didn't. (Lisa)

Although neither student directly communicated with the professor about the situation,

each expressed a preoccupation with the climate. Such a preoccupation can directly interfere with absorbing and focusing on the material, as represented by Bobby's response.

Yeah, really just this last Friday in my Spanish class the teacher was going around the room and in Spanish trying to get just to talk about our boy friends or our girlfriends. As soon as she started I got really nervous, you know, like I was only thinking about what I was going to say, I had no idea what the rest of the class was saying because I was so nervous. Like, do I lie and say "my girlfriend . . . blah, blah, blah," or do I come out to this entire class and tell my about my boyfriend. You know, I mean it's probably really stupid and all. Really it shouldn't be that big of a deal. I mean earlier I said, "Yes, my car is brown" only because I couldn't remember the word for green, but still for some dumb reason it was important. Well, here's what's really funny. By the time I had made up my mind just to be evasive and say "I don't have a girlfriend" the teacher was asking everyone about their pets.

There are many interesting and important aspects of this narrative. Bobby eludes to the distraction this process evoked. Instead of following the discussion, he was thinking about how to handle the potentially embarrassing situation. This is one example of how academic experiences can be hindered by the marginalization process and the coping strategies employed to deal with these issues. Unfortunately, many students wanted to respond, but felt they could not. Yet, from these it is clear that the interaction stays with the student for an extended period of time because they were recounted with energy and passion. These students are either still sorry they failed to say something at the time, or are still irritated by the situation which led to their feelings of alienation.

Dropping Out. This is the final category, and the most difficult area to research. Obviously, we were only talking to college students currently in school; yet, we were very surprised to discover that many we talked to had dropped out of school at one time or another. Usually, their discontinuing school was a direct result of their sexuality.

If you look at my transcripts you can see my grades and how they plummeted in a couple semesters and kicked back up again. That is exactly when I was coming out. (Jimmy)

I was going to drop out of school because I was getting such bad grades, which was really weird because everyone always told me how smart I am. I used to get really good grades, I mean I had nothing else to do. Everyone hated me and teased me in class. It was like I'll show those fuckers, eat my "A." But then I started listening to them call me names all the time, and said, "well maybe that's it, I'm gay." I couldn't stay in school, but I came back and found out that no

one knows you, so I've hung in there, and realized being gay doesn't equal having leprosy and I'm doing OK now. (Linda)

I went away to college and I really had a hard time coming out. The first couple semesters my grades were good and the more I came out the worse I did in school and eventually I dropped out of school. It was a really bad situation where I knew I was gay, but didn't want to be gay. A sort of inner conflict and so I dropped out of school and I moved home. That wasn't so good. So then eventually I moved to California and I started becoming more comfortable with myself and when I reentered school my grades were just really good. I could concentrate more on school than on having to concentrate on myself and school. (Joe)

The stories represented here are only a portion of the population as we have not yet heard from those students who have not made it back to school. However, by listening to these narrations, clues can be gleaned about those that drop out forever.

Discussion

Perhaps D'Emilio (1990) phrased it best by stating that as academicians, "having been granted the extraordinary privilege of thinking critically as a way of life, we should be astute enough to recognize when a group of people is being systematically mistreated" (p. 18). As researchers whose professional goals are aimed toward higher education, our future seems inextricably linked to our own success in reaching all students as best we can. To do this, we will explain the model that was constructed to represent the relationship between the perceptions and responses of inclusion or exclusion in the classroom. Next, we will discuss the implications of these findings and reveal the limitations of this study. Finally, we conclude with a discussion of suggestions for future research.

To explain the connection between the "Marginalizing-Centralizing" continuum of messages and the subsequent "Self-Assured--Self-Conscious" continuum of coping strategies employed to contend with feelings of marginalization, we have constructed a model (see Appendix A). This representation was designed to illustrate the interrelationships between gay/lesbian message perception, and their responses to those messages. For this model, the message perceived is viewed along a continuum ranging from Explicitly Marginalizing to

Implicitly Marginalizing and Implicitly Centralizing to Explicitly Centralizing. The student's reaction to the perceived message ranges from a response grounded in self-assuredness to a response grounded in self-consciousness.

For example, the choice to respond by coming out is located in the upper portion of quadrant I and II, above the messages that were communicated indirectly. This is because students tended not to come out when highly threatened (Explicitly Marginalized) for fear of ostracism. They also tended not to come out when highly included (Explicitly Centralized) because there was no need. The "coming out" sections are on the upper portion of the graph because students that came out as a response illustrated higher levels of self-comfort.

Responding but remaining closeted was placed lower on the graph and further toward the edges, yet still in quadrant I and II. This is because responding in general takes a certain degree of self-assuredness, yet these individuals tended not to be as comfortable as those who came out in class. They are further toward the ends of the continuum because these strategies were employed more often as the message became more extreme, either positively or negatively. Perhaps this was because these individuals had less to lose by responding because they did so anonymously.

Non responding reactions were placed in Quadrants III and IV. When there was no active response, the student tended to be more self-conscious, yet internally responded to a greater variety of marginalizing situations. The intensity of the message did not seem to matter to this group, probably because they did not outwardly respond to it. Yet, this group did tell stories of the internal conflict felt by not responding to marginalizing messages.

The final group consists of those students who told stories of dropping out of school

all together. These students illustrated the greatest level of self-consciousness and there was no pattern to the messages to which they were responding. We feel their coming out process affected this in a dramatic way, therefore it was difficult to determine the exact relationship between message and response. Here, students seemed to be reacting more to the entire academic picture, and less to specific messages perceived in the classroom.

All responses are illustrated to demonstrate the movement and variety within each section. The top and bottom portion of the "Self-comfortability--Self-uncomfortability" continuum is dotted to suggest the difficulty in determining the reason for the coming out coping strategy. This may be because when people were either extremely self-assured or self-conscious, their reaction seemed less to do with the message and more with their comfort level.

Implications of the Research

The wave of multiculturalism that has swept public education emphasizes inclusivity and understanding. In fact, Rollins (1990) has recently argued that "one of the most cherished ideas in education . . . is the belief that a genuine democracy cannot exist without the full education of all its citizens" (p. 47). While public education has embraced different cultural styles of cognition and behavior, it continues to deny recognition of gay/lesbian contributions and perspectives. The circumstances are obvious: homosexual students do not have the same rights as their heterosexual counterparts when it comes to discovering how they fit into history, how they fit into society, or even how they fit into the classroom. What we have today in college classrooms "is a world in which young lesbian and gay students often feel no real sense of belonging, and where they have precious little opportunity to develop a sustaining sense of their own self-esteem" (Watney, 1991, p. 398). The

institutional dimensions of prejudice stifle their growth, as we heard over and over again in their stories. In the focus groups, the gay/lesbian students were surprised (and in a strange way, comforted) to hear that all of the others had very similar experiences.

Strategies must be taken to implement sensitivity into the curriculum and into the attitudes prevalent in our classrooms. For instance, when using students as examples in our classrooms, we make it a point to say ". . . with your husband, your wife, or your partner." Additionally, the university requirement of multiculturalism has been implemented into the introductory public speaking classes that we teach. So, we include the topic of homosexuality as a co-culture that can be investigated. Finally, in various lectures (i.e., "Audience Analysis") we are conscious to include sexual orientation as an important demographic feature. In these ways, the level of acceptance is usually heightened and issues of the diversity of sexuality is often discussed. Interestingly, in talking with other teaching associates about their classroom discussions and student's speech topics, we have discovered that our rates of gay/lesbian issues and topics are significantly higher than those who are not as aware of the absence of the gay/lesbian perspective.

On a more theoretical level, gay/lesbian students have traditionally been silenced in the research as often as they have been in the classroom. We believe that exploring gay/lesbian issues with more qualitative methods can access important details that cannot possibly come through quantitative measures. Expanding the tool box of research methods would indeed empower the voices we so faintly hear. Our use of interviews and focus groups are a step in the naturalistic direction, but more needs to be done with respect to challenging the assumptions of both educators and researchers.

Limitations of the Study

The biggest limitation to this study was the at-risk nature of the population. The students most at risk of marginalization were difficult to attract to a study group. The sample represented here are the students on college campuses who are the most active and the most "out." They were either attending the weekly Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual Student Union Meetings, members of Delta Lambda Phi (the national gay fraternity), or comfortable enough to answer an ad in the newspaper requesting gay/lesbian college students. For this reason, the students who are truly invisible in our college classrooms remained invisible throughout this study. This was an obstacle we could not seem to overcome, so we only talked to the students who were making it through the system.

A second limitation was the sample size. We talked to 33 people in a total of six focus groups. Because of the sensitive nature of our study many participants either backed out of a group, or simply did not show up. Because a group could not be conducted without at least five participants, this wasted quite a bit of time for all involved. Also, people seemed very hesitant to respond to the newspaper advertisements. To our dismay, over 75 percent of the responses were crank phone calls. The prank usually went something like this: The caller sounded interested in the project and would leave a name and phone number. When we would return the call, the person on the other end of the phone would, of course, have never heard of us before, and usually blame it on a roommate or friend. This made contacting participants very challenging.

A third limitation is that each focus group only met once. This did not allow participants much time to formulate responses and anything not shared within the hour was lost. Perhaps the data would have been richer and fuller if participants had a longer period

of time to think about circumstances to share with the group. Meeting over time could illustrate the temporal nature of marginalization and coping strategies and the evolution of these processes.

Directions for Future Research

In response to the limitations listed above, researchers would need to find other ways to gather participants (i. e., Gay & Lesbian Youth Alliance, Gay & Lesbian Community Center, advertisements in local Gay/Lesbian newspapers, etc.). Also, networking through the dorms on college campuses, might help researchers to gain access to those students at risk and most difficult to contact. We would also suggest experimenting with focus group sessions over time. Students might take what they learn from their first focus group back into the classroom, thus enabling them to perceive their climate differently than they might have before.

For further study, we would recommend an examination of the coming out process and its specific relationship to the gay's/lesbian's academic experience. We noticed that the coming out process seems to dramatically disturb the academic process, yet we did not have enough data on this specific research area to examine it fully. D'Augelli (1991), reports that on the average, a gay men's "first disclosure to another person--their coming out--occurred in college, as did their first relationship" (p. 144). He continues to report that "far more psychological tension occurs during the college years in the management of gay status interpersonally and socially" (p. 144). Understanding this, it is not surprising that we stories similar to Brian's.

I've only been out during school for about a year and the first semester that I was coming out was particularly hard emotionally and just kind of overload on a lot of things. I started gradually not going to class that semester because there were other things I was dealing with. So many of these feelings that I never had up to that point. School was the least thing on my mind, none of it made any sense. I did really bad. I had incompletes in everything. It was

awful. I felt like, why did I come out at this time? Now I'm going to repeat everything I've done. It really did affect me a lot in school. I mean tremendously and during that semester I had a lot of writing assignments and creative writing assignments and I couldn't do them because too many things. I was too preoccupied. Too much stress. It was actually very, very bad. Very, very hard. It was hard to come out and go to school. After I found a support group and felt more comfortable with myself even the mental process of doing papers comes a little more easily since I don't feel so suppressed or I have no reason to feel shut down. It did affect me a lot.

This clearly illustrates the need for examining specifically the effects of the coming out process on academic experiences.

As future educators, it is difficult to imagine a world where studies such as this are not needed. It is even more difficult to imagine that research studying the survival tactics of a co-culture is needed in today's society. However, amidst conducting this study, one of the researchers was shocked to find a flier on her car that read in bold letters, "AIDS KILLS FAGS DEAD!" (Williams, 1993). The flier went on for seven obnoxious paragraphs claiming that heterosexuals dying of AIDS represent "the innocent victims of homosexual aggression." This flier, written and signed by a political science major, suggested that "if a vaccine for AIDS should be discovered, it should be withheld from homosexuals and others who don't deserve it." He concludes by suggesting that we write our congressperson to ask them "to recognize the parasitic crime of homosexuality and make it a crime punishable by death; thus physically preventing homosexuals from inflicting any further threat to public safety." Although many educators choose to close their eyes, such hostility continues to exemplify the climate that gays/lesbians face: Hostility that they do not deserve, written by someone who may be in their classes. Such homophobia is prevalent on campuses, threatening the future of our society. Fortunately, the stories of the gay men and lesbian women we have talked to will ring louder in our ears. We will carry their tales with us into every classroom. Through this, we hope to lead an effort into leaving the closet door ajar.

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Appendix A

The Four Dimensions of Gay/Lesbian Classroom Experiences

